

'they are just there': fictioning the visual in Gertrude Stein's 'landscapes'

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I have always liked things that were all at once.

Not abundance so much as excess.

But excess too is a not quite correct word: what I am thinking about, what I have often loved, is the exuberance of too much possibility, those things that capture and organise or at least aestheticise the ways the world is often too much.

[A Polish poet, a line I first encountered as the epigraph to a novel about global pandemic and the future it might wreak: "there is too much world".]

The things that catch this too much, that manage to somehow **"capture and represent the richness of the natural world"**, are the things I find the most interesting because, in catching the too much, they tell us something about the catching as well as about the too much.

This too much, is, I think, often a consequence of scale and contrast: the things that hold specificity in tension with the global scale, that show the lines of operation in a system, lines of operation that are both too much to contemplate while also being so distinct and clear. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing thinks this too much, this collision and collusion of scales, through friction, specifically the frictions that are generated – importantly, usefully – in the 'awkward, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference' that trying to hold the universal and the particular together inevitably creates (Tsing, 2011, p. 4). Friction is 'the grip of worldly encounter' (Tsing, 2011, p. 1). Tsing, in her book, is thinking about global capitalism: capitalism's specificities are the consequence of bringing capitalism's universals into action through worldly encounter. This is important because "In the historical particularity of global connections, domination and discipline come into their own, but not always in the forms laid out by their proponents." (Tsing, 2011, p. 5)

It is this that I think the quality I am calling too much might be capturing: the friction of the encounter between the universal and the particular; the ways things 'come into their own' in ways that are not necessarily the intended forms. The space this opens, a kind of possibility in the construction of this shared reality (a shared reality).

And thinking about this: about too much world, about the all at once ness of certain things, certain artworks that are too full yet also just right certain moments in the world that are also too much, yet also somehow satisfying in the same way, about what this might have to do with the connections, domination and discipline of capitalism, what this might have to do with how we build a shared reality to live in, is perhaps why, I think about Gertrude Stein and her landscapes.

And there is enough in Stein to stay with her, which is what my original intention was, but I keep thinking about Umberto Eco, about *Casablanca* and the clichés who are having a ball.

And so I will think about why, what the relation is between these two texts, about what they can tell us about how we visualise, conceptualise, create and make real certain futures, certain presents, certain pasts.

Or rather, I will talk about them both and hope that the relation is there.

[the two texts being 'Plays' an essay by Gertrude Stein from 1935 collection *Lectures in America* (Stein, 1988) and 'Casablanca, or the Clichés are Having a Ball' an essay from 1994 by Umberto Eco (Eco, 2012)]

I first read Stein's essay many years ago, and I have been more or less obsessed with it ever since. I have spoken, written, made artworks and published essays about 'Plays', and more specifically about the 'nervousness' Stein discusses in it.

Theatre makes Stein nervous because one's experience, one's emotional time as an audience member, is syncopated with the actions unfolding on stage. The emotional time of the audience and those of the story on stage do not align.

Sara Ahmed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, writes that emotions "both generate their objects, and repeat past associations" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 194) Ahmed is talking – like Stein but also not like Stein – about how 'Emotions are relation', how emotions circulate and, in doing so, create economies of impact, accrue to objects – and Ahmed's objects are not just material but also imagined objects – sticking to things as much as shaping them.

Ahmed is thinking about bodies, about how feelings accrue to certain bodies and thus delimit – make possible or implausible – their movements in the world. How emotion captures, collects, documents the strain of moving in worlds that don't intend for you to be there. Emotion is consequence, consequential. It documents how we feel the world, its too much, alongside one another. The ways that is and is not easy.

I have written elsewhere, and years ago, about how Stein's preoccupation with emotional overlays with Sara Ahmed's. Specifically, how Ahmed's sense of the stickiness of certain feelings, certain moments, might be read through and with Stein's nervousness as a way of understanding something about the anxiety of digital ubiquity.

But that isn't what this is about.

This is about 'landscapes' which are, for Stein, a kind of solution, an answer.

The thing Stein is interested in, the thing I am interested in – have been, continue to be – interested in, is relation, is the feelings found, built, structured, by relation.

Stein is talking about the relations between audiences and event, between performance and life, between stories and experiences, between one person's time and another's.

That this relation, these relations, are out of sync, out of time with one another, unsettles Stein, creates a problem, a friction. Here, there is an overabundance of story, of different tempos, of feeling and reactions. This makes a friction, a friction found in the effort to "**capture and represent**", a friction found in the richness of relations or perhaps in their overabundance.

Stein solves this problem of theatre – the problem being all the different experiences of time, of story, this syncopation – in her own writing, her own plays, with a visual metaphor, with landscapes: 'all these things that might have been a story [...] as a landscape they are just there' (Stein, p. 131). She writes :

A landscape does not move nothing really moves in a landscape but things are there, and I put into the play the things that were there.

Magpies are in the landscape that is they are in the sky of a landscape, they are black and white and they are in the sky of the landscape [...] When they are in the sky they do something that I have never seen other bird do they hold themselves up and down and look flat against the sky.

A very famous French inventor of things that have to do with stabilisation in aviation told me that what I told him magpies did could not be done by any bird but anyways the magpies [...] do do it or do not at least they look as if they do do it. They look exactly like the birds in the Annunciation pictures the bird which is the Holy Ghost and rests flat against the side sky very high. (Stein, p. 129).

Stein's explanation of the landscape, of how a landscape works, is a bit of visual fictioning. The magpies lie flat against the sky not moving, despite the fact that what 'magpies did could not be done by any bird but anyways the magpies [...] do do it'.

And so, to solve the problem caused by telling stories, by the unfolding of events that are both real and unreal – this is the central remit of the theatre: the really real that is also fiction, also unreal – Stein makes a new fiction, a visual mode of relation that aims to take away time and with it any feeling of emotional syncopation, which is to say relation or at least unease. It is easy to read Stein's landscape as a theory against emotional turmoil, against difference and friction, but I think it isn't just that. There is also something of an all at once in what she proposes: rather than move through things with time, take them as they are, all at once, catch them in all their overlapping relations

And what happens to things that might have been a story: in a landscape, they are just there.

As Stein's explanation via magpies makes clear, the landscape doesn't escape the story, it instead invites a new fiction which, as we follow her line of thought into the Annunciation, is also an old fiction.

Stein's landscapes play with, and against, the temporality of the theatre: instead, Stein stops time so that things are 'just here', hanging in the air beside each other. In a landscape, we see time as theatrical, as something constructed and then brought into being by its performance.

Theatricality allows us to witness and participate in the process by which discourse spaces, reflects, refracts knowledge, the world, a shared reality: as Erika Fischer-Lichte suggests, a particular performance '...turns out to be a field of experimentation where we can test our capacity for, and the possibilities of constructing reality' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 104). And I will not take up all the ways that performance can and does extend off the stage, into images, into storytelling, into public theatre and private acts. Suffice to state that when I say performance, when Fischer-Lichte says performance, we are talking about an artform but also we are talking about all the other ways a world can be, is made real, temporarily or permanently. Fischer-Lichte argues that this theatricality focuses the audience's – and this is the "we" who can test our capacity – attention on 'the very process of construction and the conditions underlining it' (Ibid.).

Thinking this process into time, thinking through the ways performance interrupts time, temporality, Rebecca Schneider writes: 'To trouble linear temporality – to suggest that time may be touched, crossed, visited or revisited, that time is transitive and flexible, that time may occur in time, that time is not one – never only one – is to court the ancient (and tired) Western anxiety over ideality and originality. The threat of theatricality is still the threat of the imposter status of the copy, the double, the mimetic, the second, the surrogate, the feminine, or the queer.' (Schneider, 2011, p. 30) And this is, I argue, what Stein's landscapes help us conceive of, they help us court this 'ancient (and tired) Western anxiety over ideality and originality' and play instead with the "the threat of the imposter status of the copy"

It is something in this play, this construction, in the consequence, the threat of the copy, the new fiction that is an old fiction, the new image and the old, this landscape and that one, the organising of a story into things that are 'just there' that finds me with Eco, and with the clichés who are having a ball, who appear in abundance, in overabundance.

For those that don't know Eco's essay, it is short and charming and basically suggests that the reason that *Casablanca* – a film that Eco claims is 'aesthetically [...] or by any critical standards [...] very mediocre' (p. 439)– is a source of fascination because it is not one cliché but hundreds. There are clichés of places (imaginariums of Africa, of occupied France, Nazi German, free America, the Exotic, the Homeland), of narratives (the Passage, the Flight, the Holy War, the Promised Land, Unhappy Love, Heroic Self Sacrifice, the Triumph of Purity), of characters (the Returning Hero, the Lovelorn Ascetic, the Loyal Servant, the Redeemed Drunkard, the Betrayed Husband, the Victorious Lover).

Eco writes: ‘Two clichés make us laugh. A hundred clichés move us. For we sense dimly that the clichés are talking *among themselves*, and celebrating a reunion [...] the height of banality allows us to catch a glimpse of the sublime’ (p. 442).

In this abundance, this excess of clichés becomes a kind of landscape: ‘all these things that might have been a story [...] they are just there’ (Stein, p. 131).

And it is the idea of the party, but also, importantly, the idea that the clichés might be talking amongst themselves, colluding or collaborating in their own meanings in ways that exceed, precede, simply ignore, an outsider’s view or understanding. A friction found between the universality of the cliché and its specificity here, in this film, this worldly encounter.

Eco’s ball is like Stein’s landscape, is a type of landscape: a way of having things at once, just here – a metaphor that tells a story about how things are in relation to one another and why.

Eco makes *Casablanca* into, takes *Casablanca* as what Jacques Rancière, in the final chapter of *The Emancipated Spectator*, calls a ‘pensive image’: Rancière writes that “pensiveness might be [...] defined as [a] tangle between different forms of indeterminacy...an effect of circulation, between the subject, the photographer and us, the intentional and the unintentional, the known and the unknown, the expressed and the unexpressed, the present and the past.[...] pensiveness stems from the impossibility of making two images coincide...” (Rancière, 2009, pp. 114–115) and here the two images Rancière is talking about are the two images held by within the photograph: the socially and historically determined image and the abstracted and aestheticized one. In *Casablanca*, it is the clichés that are all impossibly together, creating a space between themselves. A space for indeterminacy, for pensiveness and for friction, both of which are ways of talking about, thinking about, a kind of space between the intended and the actual, the space that real world actually gets lived in.

It is new landscapes that “capture and represent the richness of the natural world”.

This idea, this line: “capture and represent the richness of the natural world” – is not my own. It is from an essay called ‘What is Knowledge Representation?’ produced by the MIT AI Lab in the mid-90s (Davis et al., 1993). I think, have been thinking about this essay, for a while.

I have been misunderstanding it, misreading in perhaps a similar way to how I misread Stein: thinking its universality into a different moment of specificity, a different worldly connection.

Like the idea of all at once ness – or, because it feels very much kin with all at once ness – I like Knowledge Representation as an idea. The effort to capture and organise information, the capital letters of it: Knowledge, Representation. The folly of it: the one to one map of the world, the taxonomies that tell us stories about our own worldbuilding at the same moment we think we learn about someone else’s, the universals visualised and imagined into their specificities.

A landscape is a kind of Knowledge Representation. A cliché is a Knowledge Representation. But, even more so, the clichés having a ball is a Knowledge Representation: it captures not just the knowledge but relations. The landscape, the ball provide structures, metaphors for knowing the feelings that string ideas together.

I think it matters that these examples are slightly ridiculous, that they include a kind of humour (the magpies that hang in the sky, the clichés that chatter one to the other). Because some of what I find important in the all at once of the world, its too much, in these moments, is how they are instances that demonstrate the failure of our systems, any systems, to properly or entirely hold anything at all. And perhaps also, in part, because these playful and strange examples are strands of a story that easily, quickly, importantly loses its humour.

We could turn, for instance, for a moment, to Katherine McKittrick, who in *Dear Science and Other Stories*, writes that 'Discipline is empire'; she writes, via Cesaire, Fanon, Wynter, Hartman, about other stories, other fictionings that shape and place and render worlds through the telling of them. She writes about the dire and real consequences of these landscapes, these clichés and their parties, these knowledge representations.

We could turn to back Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, to Sara Ahmed, to Barad, Braidotti, to Jose Muñoz, to Haraway, to Sharpe, to Le Guin, to Jemisin. To the theorists I've talked about, to the ones I said I'd talk about and didn't, to the storytellers who make related ideas in different landscapes.

To Rebecca Schneider and the 'reality effect of faux upon faux that gives us, so promisingly, the transitivity of the real, which is to say its mutability, its availability for and as change.' (Schneider, 2011, p. 177). To the ways that, as Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes, "the historical particularity of global connections, domination and discipline come into their own, but not always in the forms laid out by their proponents." (Tsing, 2011, p. 5). To Sara Ahmed and emotions, which "may be crucial to showing us why transformations are so difficult (we remain invested in what we critique), but also how they are possible (our investments move as we move)" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 172).

So: I am interested in how there is too much world, how that too much gets told, comes into relation, into friction, into story, why by who in what metaphors. What structures the feelings of being in relation, and how Knowledge gets named and then organised and then called a kind of capture and why.

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